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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000446

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/30/2016

TAGS: PGOV PHUM ECON PREL BM

SUBJECT: EMBASSY'S MANDALAY WEEK - ONE MONTH LATER

REF: A. RANGOON 299

1B. RANGOON 290

1C. RANGOON 289

1D. RANGOON 287

Classified By: Poloff Dean Tidwell for Reasons 1.4 (b, d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: One month after the Embassy's outreach week in Mandalay, the regime continues to react. Security officials interrogated 50 local residents who had contact with Emboffs during our February 27 - March 2 visit to outreach week in Mandalay, and the GOB ordered many Burmese newspapers to print on March 29 another article criticizing our outreach and vowing to oppose future Embassy activities in Mandalay. Mandalay's authorities are making life tougher for citizens in other ways: although they cannot provide regular power to the city, they banned the presence of private electricity generators from sidewalks beginning March 31. Local authorities also continue to restrict the activities of Christian groups in Mandalay Division. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Poloff held a follow-up meeting in Rangoon on March 30 with a Chin businessman whom he met during Embassy outreach week in Mandalay. The businessman reported that after his Embassy meeting in Mandalay on March 1, Special Branch (SB) investigative police were waiting at his home and interrogated him for an hour. He explained to the authorities that he met poloff to discuss opportunities for his son to study in the United States. SB questioned him for three consecutive days. When he complained that he was not a politician, but a businessman, the SB assured him that they were not singling him out. They told him they were also questioning 50 other persons who met with the Americans in Mandalay (ref D).

13. (C) On March 29, several Burmese weekly newspapers published a new GOB-planted article condemning the recent U.S. visit to Mandalay. Besides mentioning the Charge and the P/E Section Chief by name, the article criticized the "unauthorized" activities Emboffs conducted while in Mandalay, including meetings with opposition political parties, attending a comedy troupe performance, conducting consular anti-fraud investigations, and attempting to show the "political" movie "Crash." The article ended by warning that "if the Embassy continues such activities, it will definitely face more such opposition from the Burmese."

14. (C) The ethnic businessman also described the serious lack of electricity in Mandalay at present (ref A). He said electricity was rarely available for even for one day out of three. Mandalay municipal authorities recently banned people from operating private generators on sidewalks in front of homes and businesses, to take effect from March 31. The source was unsure whether the authorities would begin to confiscate the generators, fine violators, or charge a new tax for those who wished to continue to generate their own electricity.

15. (C) The Mandalay source also reported that Mandalay authorities were not granting permits to Christians this year to hold their traditional large Easter celebrations in April. Therefore, Christian groups in Mandalay plan to hold small, discrete services this year. Mandalay Christians traditionally hold a "summer Bible course" in Pyin Oo Lwin (Maymyo) during the April 13-16 Water Festival, but this year local authorities have rejected their requests to hold this annual event, citing lack of permission from "higher authorities."

16. (C) COMMENT: Mandalay's new Regional Military Commander is much more restrictive than his predecessor, but GOB efforts to interrogate and intimidate citizens and condemn our outreach activities bear testimony to the importance of these visits and the need for us to continue to engage the residents of Mandalay on a regular basis. END COMMENT.

STOLTZ